

Environment Exhibit

New York Gallery Puts On Big Show

By GERALD CLOW, 1970

It is a delight to find a small little-known gallery in New York with a show that completely outperforms those of the larger ones. Lack of space, funds, and recruiting ability usually force the smaller museums to present incomplete one-man shows. At best they are the archives, the catacombs of aspiring artists.

Not so at the Museum of Contemporary Crafts for the next two weeks, where a 16-piece three-floor exhibit called "Contemplation Environments" parallels the Museum of Modern Art's "Spaces" in futuristic significance yet with ten times the creativity, variety, and completeness of audience participation.

To begin with "Contemplation" takes a theme—the need for isolated places of peace and quiet in the midst of the urban landscape in which man can find time for some inner contemplation.

As director Paul Smith describes it, "This exhibit is primarily concerned with the effect of spaces on man as a contemplative spirit (being), with the kinds of physical and architectural surroundings which elicit a peaceful, meditative response from man."

Architect Consulted

Furthermore, the show is unique in that it was developed and not just collected. Having found many artists who were involved with this theme and willing to contribute, the Museum engaged an architect, Gamal El-Zoghby, to work with each artist to find the best architectural solution to each concept.

"The underlying challenge," as Smith puts it, "was the development of a totally unified environment, one which would direct the viewer through the exhibition in the most efficient manner, would be expressive of the theme of the exhibition, and would provide each environment with discrete space."

The result is not the generalized, poorly realized environmental playland as at the Museum of Modern Art, but instead a delightfully controlled, continuous discovering of weird surprises. First, egg-shaped cushion-contoured chairs, in whose depths weird sound effects play; then, following a dark corridor with hanging signposts, the viewer alternately enters a series of small enclosures that shelter a variety of kinetic, luminous, responsive art works, perfect for nearly all levels of audience participation.

On the first floor the most involving and humorous work is a clear plastic table-tank of water, eerily lit up in a dark space; two viewers can duck underneath and, sitting on swivel chairs, look out into the water through large space-suit bubbles at the moving water and the plastic floats bobbing before their eyes.

Upstairs the mezzanine section, probably the most varied and complete of the exhibit, is a shoeless steeple chase: first down into an aluminum-enclosed geodesic dome live with heat and light patterns; then a shoeless venture back on a thick carpet into a gauze-enclosed womb of white peace; then crawling down into a carved wooden Dr. Seussian shoe with a ful-lined cavity within and

an ideastic light bulb that signals when a person is within; and finally a tactile primeval cave filled with hanging, moss-like yarn, where all sounds are absorbed and smiling faces beckon you in.

Four Bare Rooms

The top floor features four bare rooms where, lying back on double mattresses and gazing up out through a skylight, the viewer is greeted with the sounds of dawn (birds), bells, ocean waves, and crickets. There is even a walk-in hayloft for those who like to recall their childhood days.

The total effect is of a gentle and continuous control of the audience, with a variety of spaces and objects to amuse them. Responses run the gamut of humor, wonder, joy, hilarity. There are moments of serenity and aloneness, but the exhibit is really ideal for couples, perfect to share with friends, an unexcelled place for a group party.

(Shows are at 12:30, 2, 3:30, 5, 6:30, cost 50 cents with a student ID, and last for a very short hour. Admission is limited to 25 persons per show, so as not to overcrowd the individual displays. The guards are few and well concealed in the darkness.)

Sophisticated Technology

Meanwhile, at the "Spaces" show, technology is used in perhaps a more sophisticated and large-scale attempt at environmental art—that is, art that not only intrudes into the environment, but that becomes the environment.

Yet the effect is quite bland and wears rapidly. Two artists represented go further in controlling spaces invisibly; the art work is not an object, material with which to participate, but the created darkness, the sense of illusion.

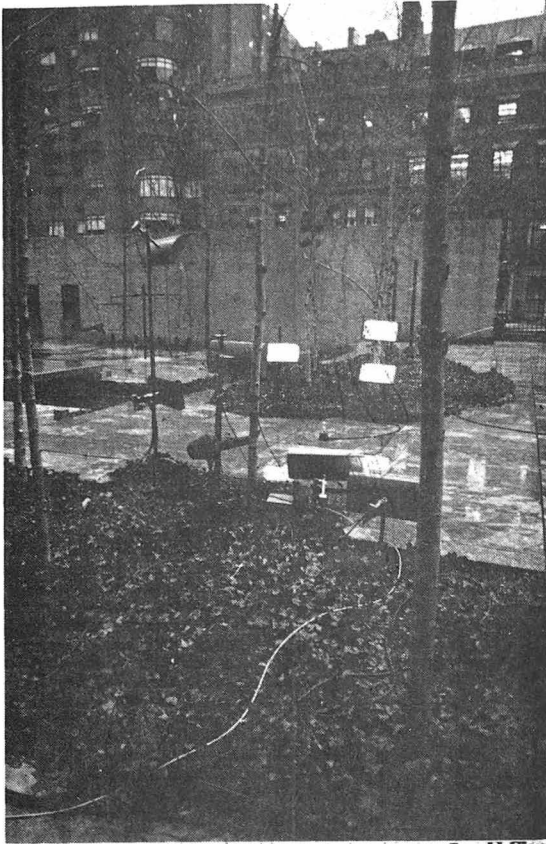
Michael Asher does this with a blank, semi-dark soundproof room, where with shoes in hand the viewer can pad around meditatively, perhaps hearing his own heart beat; and Larry Bell creates two pitch-black corridors with a created illusion of receding walls through simple yet ingenious lighting effects.

Robert Morris' and Dan Flavin's works are more objects in the traditional sense, although made of unconventional materials—earths, trees, fluorescent bulbs—and are made to intrude into the audience's space. Flavin turns the traditional light-reflecting quality of sculpture into light for its own sake, using two racks of latticed fluorescent lights; the effect is one of brilliance, a sense of weightlessness, an environment of cool light, a sense of purity, of pure brilliance.

Morris meanwhile creates the effect of an alpine setting, with receding pines (12" in front, 6" in the rear) on four upward graded plots of earth, contained by rust-forming Cor-ten steel and all moistened at a brisk 50 degrees by a fog condenser. His work is a tangible object, more so than Flavin's, yet lacking the total control of technology to pull off the desired effect.

Yale Sponsored Contribution

Only Pulsa—a Yale sponsored group of seven technicians with an impressive backlog of knowledge and practical experience—achieves any sense of real control of and response to the audience with their highly efficient electronic environment in the Museum's sculpture garden.



Gerald Clow

A conglomeration of Pulsa components (infra red heaters, strobe lights, electronic sensors, and "bleepers") glowering in deserted in the evening rain.